

Harriet Beecher Stowe



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Stowe c. 1870

Born	Harriet Elisabeth Beecher June 14, 1811 Litchfield, Connecticut , U.S.
Died	July 1, 1896 (aged 85) Hartford, Connecticut , U.S.
Pen name	Christopher Crowfield
Notable works	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>
Spouse	Calvin Ellis Stowe (m. 1836; died 1886)
Children	7

Relatives

[Beecher family](#)

Signature



Life and work

Harriet Elisabeth Beecher was born in [Litchfield, Connecticut](#), on June 14, 1811.^[1] She was the sixth of 11 children^[2] born to outspoken [Calvinist](#) preacher [Lyman Beecher](#). Her mother was his first wife, Roxana (Foote), a deeply religious woman who died when Stowe was only five years old. Roxana's maternal grandfather was General Andrew Ward of the [Revolutionary War](#). Harriet's siblings included a sister, [Catharine Beecher](#), who became an educator and author, as well as brothers who became ministers: including [Henry Ward Beecher](#), who became a famous preacher and abolitionist, [Charles Beecher](#), and [Edward Beecher](#).^[3]

Harriet enrolled in the [Hartford Female Seminary](#) run by her older sister Catharine, where she received a traditional academic education — rather uncommon for women at the time — with a focus in the [Classics](#), languages, and mathematics. Among her classmates was Sarah P. Willis, who later wrote under the pseudonym [Fanny Fern](#).^[4]

In 1832, at the age of 21, Harriet Beecher moved to [Cincinnati, Ohio](#), to join her father, who had become the president of [Lane Theological Seminary](#). There, she also joined the [Semi-Colon Club](#), a literary salon and social club whose members included the Beecher sisters, [Caroline Lee Hentz](#), [Salmon P. Chase](#) (future governor of Ohio and [United States Secretary of the Treasury](#) under President Lincoln), [Emily Blackwell](#) and others.^[5] Cincinnati's trade and shipping business on the [Ohio River](#) was booming, drawing numerous migrants from different parts of the country, including many [escaped slaves](#), bounty hunters seeking them, and Irish immigrants who worked on the state's canals and railroads. In 1829 [the ethnic Irish attacked blacks](#), wrecking areas of the city, trying to push out these competitors for jobs. Beecher met a number of African Americans who had suffered in those attacks, and their experience contributed to her later writing about slavery. Riots took place again in [1836](#) and [1841](#), driven also by [native-born](#) anti-abolitionists.^[citation needed]

Harriet was also influenced by the [Lane Debates on Slavery](#). The biggest event ever to take place at Lane, it was the series of debates held on 18 days in February 1834, between [colonization](#) and abolition defenders, decisively won by [Theodore Weld](#) and other abolitionists. Elisabeth attended most of the debates.^{[6]:171} Her father and the trustees, afraid of more violence from anti-abolitionist whites, prohibited any further discussions of the topic. The result was a [mass exodus of the Lane students](#), together with a supportive trustee and a professor, who moved as a group to the new [Oberlin Collegiate Institute](#) after its trustees agreed, by a close and acrimonious vote, to accept students regardless of "race", and to allow discussions of any topic.

It was in the literary club at Lane that she met Rev. [Calvin Ellis Stowe](#), a widower who was a professor of Biblical Literature at the seminary.^[7] The two married at the Seminary on January 6, 1836.^[8] The Stowes had seven children, including twin daughters.^[citation needed]

***Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Civil War**



Portrait of Stowe by Alanson Fisher, 1853 ([National Portrait](#)

[Gallery](#))

Congress passed the [Fugitive Slave Act of 1850](#), prohibiting assistance to fugitives and strengthening sanctions even in free states. At the time, Stowe had moved with her family to [Brunswick, Maine](#), where her husband was now teaching at [Bowdoin College](#). Their [home](#) near the campus is protected as a National Historic Landmark.^[9] The Stowes were ardent critics of slavery and supported the [Underground Railroad](#), temporarily housing several fugitive slaves in their home. One fugitive from slavery, [John Andrew Jackson](#), wrote of hiding with Stowe in her house in Brunswick as he fled to Canada in his narrative titled "The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina" (London: Passmore & Albaster, 1862).^[10]

Stowe claimed to have had a vision of a dying slave during a communion service at Brunswick's First Parish Church, which inspired her to write his story.^[11] What also likely allowed her to empathize with slaves was the loss of her eighteen-month-old son, Samuel Charles Stowe. She noted, "Having experienced losing someone so close to me, I can sympathize with all the poor, powerless slaves at the unjust auctions. You will always be in my heart Samuel Charles Stowe."^[12] On March 9, 1850, Stowe wrote to [Gamaliel Bailey](#), editor of the weekly anti-slavery journal [The National Era](#), that she planned to write a story about the problem of slavery: "I feel now that the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak ... I hope every woman who can write will not be silent."^[13]



Daguerreotype portrait of Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852

Shortly after in June 1851, when she was 40, the first installment of [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#) was published in serial form in the newspaper *The National Era*. She originally used the subtitle "The Man That Was a Thing", but it was soon changed to "Life Among the Lowly".^[1] Installments were published weekly from June 5, 1851, to April 1, 1852.^[13] For the newspaper serialization of her novel, Stowe was paid \$400.^[14] *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in book form on March 20, 1852, by John P. Jewett with an initial print run of 5,000 copies.^[15] Each of its two volumes included three illustrations and a title-page designed by [Hammatt Billings](#).^[16] In less than a year, the book sold an unprecedented 300,000 copies.^[17] By December, as sales began to wane, Jewett issued an inexpensive edition at 37½ cents each to stimulate sales.^[18] Sales abroad, as in Britain where the book was a great success, earned Stowe nothing as there was no international copyright agreement in place during that era.^[19] In 1853 Stowe undertook a lecture tour of Britain and, to make up the royalties that she could not receive there, the Glasgow New Association for the Abolition of Slavery set up Uncle Tom's Offering.^[20]

According to Daniel R. Vollaro, the goal of the book was to educate Northerners on the realistic horrors of the things that were happening in the South. The other purpose was to try to make people in the South feel more empathetic towards the people they were forcing into slavery.^[21] The book's emotional portrayal of the effects of slavery on individuals captured the nation's attention. Stowe showed that slavery touched all of society, beyond the people directly involved as masters, traders and slaves. Her novel added to the debate about abolition and slavery, and aroused opposition in the South. In the South, Stowe was depicted as out of touch, arrogant, and guilty of slander. Within a year, 300 babies in Boston alone were named [Eva \(one of the book's characters\)](#), and a play based on the book opened in New York in November.^[22] Southerners quickly responded with numerous works of what are now called [anti-Tom novels](#), seeking to portray Southern society and slavery in more positive terms. Many of these were bestsellers, although none matched the popularity of Stowe's work, which set publishing records.^[citation needed]

After the start of the [Civil War](#), Stowe traveled to the capital, Washington, D.C., where she met President [Abraham Lincoln](#) on November 25, 1862.^[23] Stowe's daughter, Hattie, reported, "It was a very droll time that we had at the White house I assure you ... I will only say now that it was all very funny — and we were ready to explode with laughter all the while."^[24] What Lincoln said is a minor mystery. Her son later reported that Lincoln greeted her by saying, "so you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war",^[25] but this story has been found to be apocryphal.^[26] Her own accounts are vague, including the letter reporting the meeting to her husband: "I had a real funny interview with the President."^[24]

Later years

Stowe purchased property near [Jacksonville, Florida](#). In response to a newspaper article in 1873, she wrote, "I came to Florida the year after the war and held property in [Duval County](#) ever since. In all this time I have not received even an incivility from any native Floridian."^[27]

Stowe is controversial for her support of [Elizabeth Campbell, Duchess of Argyll](#), whose grandfather had been a primary enforcer of the [Highland Clearances](#), the transformation of the remote Highlands of Scotland from a militia-based society to an agricultural one that supported far fewer people. The newly homeless moved to Canada, where very bitter accounts appeared. It was Stowe's assignment to refute them using evidence the Duchess provided, in Letter XVII Volume 1 of her travel memoir *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*.^[28] Stowe was criticized for her seeming defense of the clearances.^[29]

In 1868, Stowe became one of the first editors of *Hearth and Home* magazine, one of several new publications appealing to women; she departed after a year.^[30] Stowe campaigned for the expansion of married women's rights, arguing in 1869 that:^[31]

[T]he position of a married woman ... is, in many respects, precisely similar to that of the negro slave. She can make no contract and hold no property; whatever she inherits or earns becomes at that moment the property of her husband ... Though he acquired a fortune through her, or though she earned a fortune through her talents, he is the sole master of it, and she cannot draw a penny ... [I]n the English [common law](#) a married woman is nothing at all. She passes out of legal existence.

In the 1870s, Stowe's brother [Henry Ward Beecher](#) was accused of adultery, and became the subject of a national scandal. Unable to bear the public attacks on her brother, Stowe again fled to Florida but asked family members to send her newspaper reports.^[32] Through the affair, she remained loyal to her brother and believed he was innocent.^[33]

After her return to Connecticut, Mrs. Stowe was among the founders of the Hartford Art School, which later became part of the [University of Hartford](#).

Following the death of her husband, Calvin Stowe, in 1886, Harriet started rapidly to decline in health. By 1888, *The Washington Post* reported that as a result of dementia the 77-year-old Stowe started writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* over again. She imagined that she was engaged in the original composition, and for several hours every day she industriously used pen and paper, inscribing passages of the book almost exactly word for word. This was done unconsciously from memory, the author imagining that she composed the matter as she went along. To her diseased mind the story was brand new, and she frequently exhausted herself with labor that she regarded as freshly created.^[34]

[Mark Twain](#), a neighbor of Stowe's in Hartford, recalled her last years in the following passage of his autobiography:

Her mind had decayed, and she was a pathetic figure. She wandered about all the day long in the care of a muscular Irish woman. Among the colonists of our neighborhood the doors always stood open in pleasant weather. Mrs. Stowe entered them at her own free will, and as she was always softly slippered and generally full of animal spirits, she was able to deal in surprises, and she liked to do it. She would slip up behind a person who was deep in dreams and musings and fetch a war whoop that would jump that person out of his clothes. And she had other moods. Sometimes we would hear gentle music in the drawing-room and would find her there at the piano singing ancient and melancholy songs with infinitely touching effect.^[35]

Modern researchers now speculate that at the end of her life she was suffering from [Alzheimer's disease](#).^[36]



Harriet Beecher Stowe grave

Harriet Beecher Stowe died on July 1, 1896, in [Hartford, Connecticut](#), 17 days after her 85th birthday. She is buried in the historic cemetery at [Phillips Academy](#) in [Andover, Massachusetts](#),^[37] along with her husband and their son Henry Ellis.